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SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR WHA/CEN - ROIS BEAL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BH](#)  
SUBJECT: POSITIVE SIGNS AFTER FIVE MONTHS IN OFFICE?

REFTEL: BELMOPAN 314

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (SBU) The GOB released the national budget on July 14, addressing several of the 21 pledges made in the pre-election United Democratic Party (UDP) manifesto. At first glance, the GOB has demonstrated some measurable progress compared to their manifesto and the public remains cautiously optimistic. The real test will be how the GOB addresses some of the more profound issues like weak education, health care, law enforcement, and judicial systems that have been plaguing Belize for the last decade. End Summary.

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21 PLEDGES AND THE BUDGET  
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¶2. (SBU) Prior to being elected in a landslide victory in February, the UDP issued a manifesto - 21 agenda items the party pledged to take on while in office. Shortly after the election the new government announced that it would delay the release of the national budget stating more time was needed to assess its books. The budget released on July 14 addressed several of the 21 manifesto pledges.

¶3. (SBU) The budget reflected lower General Sales Tax (GST) flow as the GOB eliminated the tax on medicines and certain staple food items to alleviate some pricing pressure on the poor. The GOB also allocated funding for training for single mothers, and identified potential funding for the refurbishment of sugar cane roads in the north. The Prime Minister pointed out that he in principle reached an agreement to obtain US\$12.5 million in financing for a new Development Finance Corporation to provide small loans to spur business development. The budget also provided for a National School Feeding Program at the primary school level and the police have already completed two summer camps under the Conscious Youth Development Programme (CYDP) to help eliminate gang violence.

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THE REST IS NOT SO EASY  
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¶4. (SBU) Education. While literacy statistics vary, they hover around older estimates from a 2000 census of 77%. Reports agree that the literacy rate in Belize has decreased since the 1980s. Again statistics vary but indicate that from 45 to 60% of teachers are trained as certified educators and many of the teachers in the classroom speak Creole rather than English, the country's official language. Most of the schools we have visited personally are in need of major structural repairs and upgrades. Three relatively small higher education opportunities exist for students wishing to pursue college degrees forcing most interested students to study abroad and to look for job opportunities abroad as well.

15. (SBU) The GOB recently pledged to create 5,000 jobs in tourism but this will be a challenge for two reasons - 1) stay-over visitors are down 2.1% and cruise ship arrivals declined 19% in the first quarter of 2008, and 2) the education system in Belize is not doing a good job training workers. This forces employers to provide lengthy and expensive training programs or source employees from overseas to avoid the headache. Thus far, we are unaware of an attempt to establish a baseline using literacy rates or national test scores to measure effects of the feeding program or the new text books issued last year. Nor have we seen evidence of planning for major improvements including attracting and developing more qualified teachers, making physical improvements to schools, facilitating nationwide after-school tutoring and sports programs, and promoting education as a means of change.

16. (SBU) Health Care. Health care in Belize is basic. Minor illnesses and injuries can be cared for locally but most expats and many local Belizeans cross the border to Mexico or go to the U.S. for treatment of anything more serious than a flu or broken bone. A severe shortage of qualified doctors and nurses exists in the country as well as a lack of technical equipment. Cuban Medical Brigade doctors make up a significant part of the medical establishment, leaving Belize vulnerable if they were to be withdrawn. The Universal Health Service hospital (UHS), a financially failing private hospital, was bailed out by the former administration by secretly diverting US\$10 million from Venezuela just prior to elections.

17. (SBU) The money diverted to UHS could have been applied to the National Health Insurance program. This program was launched as part of the election campaign of the former government without a financing plan. The current GOB has said it supports the program

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but has placed a moratorium on program expansion because funding remains an issue. The government is planning system improvements in health care including more honest procurement, improving training, sourcing doctors and nurses, and improving infrastructure and technology, but all of these take time and money.

18. (SBU) Law Enforcement and the Judiciary. The GOB pledged to create a larger police force. However, the public has little confidence in the existing police force for several reasons. Cases of police brutality hit the papers regularly. Only rarely is a police officer dismissed. Police frequently "lose" their case files and sometimes even their memories when presenting a case for trial. One recent example occurred during a high profile murder trial during which three police officers that made statements they could identify the murderer all "forgot" their statements when brought into the court room. The Attorney General (AG) made a recent statement that the judicial system in Belize is ineffective. Some of this results from low paid and untrained judges, who have, according to the AG, no incentive to bring cases to conclusion.

19. (SBU) A larger police force may not be the only solution to reducing crime. Especially when public trust is low and some "housecleaning" is needed. The National Security Ministry wants to polygraph the police force, but the project depends on outside funding and expertise. The GOB's focus on establishing a DNA lab may be ill-timed when even the Attorney General believes the judicial process is largely ineffective and needs substantial review.

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COMMENT  
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110. (SBU) Skyrocketing global food and fuel prices, unforeseen legal cases left by the former GOB's improper dealings, and a legacy of corruption and mismanaged finances would be a challenge for any new government. In the first five months in office, the new GOB has lived up to about one third of the "simpler" campaign pledges. But so far, they are only chipping away at the edges of some of the larger systemic problems in the country's infrastructure. Even the presentation of the national budget lacked a compelling overall strategic plan. However, if the government keeps only one pledge of

"no more corruption", the prospects for the country will be brighter. The real test though will be how the GOB addresses the more profound issues like weak education, health care, law enforcement, and judicial systems that have been plaguing Belize for the last decade. End Comment.

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